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ABSTRACT

It is argued that a more comprehensive, systematic understanding of the nature of the alphabet, its three identities (letters/graphemes, letters/nomenemes, sounds/phonemes), and their specific functions in the teaching of various language skills and subskills should be an integral part of the language arts curriculum and instructional plan, particularly in situations involving language minority students. The curriculum and instruction should clearly outline the objectives and the teaching/learning strategies most appropriate for recognizing and implementing the three identities and their functions, both within one language and across languages. Such an approach not only secures a more realistic understanding of this major tool of language instruction but may also minimize misconceptions held by teachers and learners. The alphabet-spelling connection is multidimensional, not unidimensional as commonly assumed. The connection is both graphic and oral, a dichotomy that can help highlight the intricate relationship between the alphabet as a tool and spelling as a process. Language arts teacher training programs should be updated to promote use of this knowledge in the language classroom. Contains 20 references. (MSE)

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SPELLING AND ITS TEACHING: A CRITICAL REVIEW*

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Edward Y. Odisho

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Traditionally, the term 'spelling' is thought to be a very common household word whose denotation is too well-defined and understood to be vague and controversial. However, any serious attempt to scrutinize the meaning of spelling as a term, its nature as a process, and its functions as a language skill will prove, beyond any doubt, that most people will experience serious difficulty in agreeing on a comprehensive and uniform definition of spelling and on what and how it should be taught. In other words, spelling is still fraught with much vagueness and controversy.

To unveil any vagueness and controversy several attempts were made to survey the available literature for definitions and to examine the uniformity and consistency among them. Unfortunately, few were found which is, perhaps, an indication that spelling is too well-known to even be defined. One definition was attested in Hanna et al (1982) which reads as follows: "the process of encoding or rendering spoken words into written symbols." Another one was found in Crystal (1992) denoting spelling as "the rules which govern the way letters are used to write the words of speech." From the perspective of the present study, whose major purpose is to reexamine spelling in general, the above definitions seem to lack a considerable degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness; at least, they exclude any attempts of encoding words without necessarily writing their symbols/letters.

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In view of such a scarcity in the commitment of individual researchers to the definition of spelling, the next step was to consult some of the most authoritative dictionaries, namely the unabridged versions of the Oxford, the Webster, and the Funk and Wagnalls dictionaries which by tradition and function cannot avoid formal definitions/denotations.

Oxford's (1989) definition reads as follows: "to name or set down in order the letters of a word or syllable; to enunciate or write by letters; to denote by certain letters in a particular order." Funk and Wagnalls' (1963) definition is: "to pronounce or write the letters of a word in proper succession; give the letters in their order." In Webster's dictionaries there are two noticeably different definitions. The Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (1956, abbrev. here as Webster/New) on which the Webster's Dictionary of the English Language: Encyclopedic Edition (1977, abbrev. here as Webster/Encyclo) is based, provide the following definition: "to name, write, print or signal the letters which make up a word or syllable, especially the right letters in the right order." Unlike the above definition, Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language (2nd. ed., 1955, 1959, abbrev. here as Webster/Inter/2nd) introduces spelling as: "to name in the proper order the letters of, as a word; to write or print in order the letters of....." In the Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language (1961 through 1993 eds. abbrev. here as Webster/Inter/3rd) a new statement is added to that of Webster/Inter/2nd which reads as follows: "to form words

with letters, symbols or signs." Generally speaking, all the above dictionary definitions are much more accurate and comprehensive than those afforded by individual researchers such as Hanna et al and Crystal, among others. However, the definitions still show different degrees of accuracy and comprehensiveness in their wording as well as in their interpretation of the nature of spelling as a process and skill. For the purpose of this study, there is no better way to interpret the wording of the dictionary definitions without some serious reconsideration of the nature of the alphabet and what it stands for.

ALPHABET IDENTITIES

In response to the question of 'What do the alphabet characters (letters) stand for?' repeatedly raised by the author on different occasions, the overwhelming responses indicate that they stand for 'sounds'. This is not untrue, but it, unfortunately, tells only part of the whole truth. As demonstrated below, the alphabet as an entity represents three drastically different identities with different functions. It is those identities and functions that matter when it comes to the definition of spelling and the develop- ment of some systematicness in its understanding and instruction.

The first identity may simply stand for a set of letters (technically known as graphemes) each of which acquires its significance /value from its sequence/position within the overall set of the alphabet letters. In other words, it is the form of the letter and its sequence in the set that matter. The typical situations in

which the sequence aspect of the first identity is best demonstrated is in enumeration; instead of using 1, 2, 3, 4 etc... one can resort to a, b, c, d etc... In this capacity, the name of the letter and the sound are not as significant as the sequence is. To further support this identity, it does not really matter whether the letter has different phonetic realizations (as with a in 'apple,' 'all,' 'about,' 'arm' and 'able' or with c in 'cat' and 'cell'). Such words will not appear in the dictionary on the basis of the phonetic value of their first letters, but rather on the basis of the alphabet letters that initiate them. Another aspect of the first identity is that of form/shape which should be distinct enough from one letter to another to signal the differences of the second and third identities. For instance, any reversal of 'b' and 'd' will result in drastic confusion in letter-naming, pronunciation and semantics.

The second identity stands for the names those letters carry or what are usually known as letter-names. The letter-names are more like monosyllabic words that function in a system of nomenclature. Hence, letter-names should not be confused with sounds - a tradition that phonics promotes as we will see in due course. On a par with the 'grapheme' label for the letter and the 'phoneme' for the sounds, the letter-names are, hereby, given the label 'nomeneme'(fr. Latin 'nomen' = name) for convenience. The nomenemes of the letters 'h', 'n', 'g', and 'y', for instance, will (to the best knowledge of the present writer) be pronounced: 'eitch', 'en', 'gee/jee' and 'why'. It is those same letters that

may carry different nomenemes across different Latin-based alphabets. In Spanish, for instance, the above letters have the nomenemes of 'hache' 'ene,' 'ge' and 'i griega'. Such a difference in the nomenemes across languages has a direct impact on the second/foreign language (L2) learning situations. For instance, if we were to orally spell 'bicycle' in English the nomeneme sequence would be: 'bee + eye + cee + why + cee + el + ee ', whereas in Spanish the same sequence would be 'be + i + ce + i griega + ce + ele + e'. Such a difference in the nomenemes is often the main cause of much hesitation and indecision in spelling by learners in L2 learning situations.

The third identity of the alphabet is that of sounds (technically known as phonemes). This identity is so commonly known to the literate people, especially teachers, that it, oftentimes, is erroneously treated as the exclusive identity of the alphabet. In speaking of the phonemic identity of the alphabet, it is unfortunate to mention that there is only limited one-to-one correspondence in English between the graphemes (letters) and the phonemes (sounds). One grapheme may have more than one phoneme. For instance, the grapheme 'a' has the following phonemic representations: [ə], [ɑ], [æ], [e or ey] and [ɔ] as in the context of 'about,' 'arm,' 'apple,' 'able' and 'all'. Moreover, only one of those five phonemes (i.e. [e]) has a phonetic value that matches the nomeneme 'a'. Conversely, one phoneme may have more than one graphemic representation as in 'f,' 'ff,' 'gh' and 'ph' for the phoneme [f]. For a schematic representation of the

above identities of the alphabet characters see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

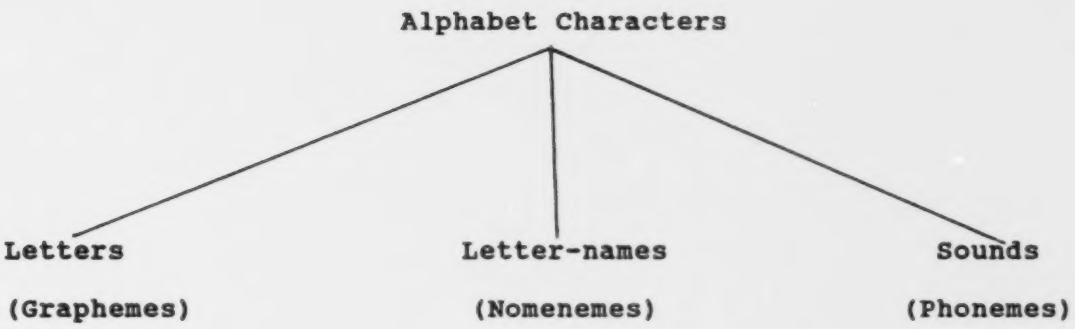

Fig. 1, A schematic representation of the three identities of the alphabet characters.

INSTRUCTIONAL RELEVANCE OF THE ALPHABET IDENTITIES TO SPELLING

The best way to proceed at this juncture is to interpret first the above-quoted dictionary definitions of spelling in terms of the three identities of the alphabet and then assess the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our understanding of spelling and the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching it. In Oxford's definition, the words 'to name' and 'to enunciate' deal with the nomenemes of the alphabet, whereas 'set down' and 'write' deal with the formation of the graphemes. Webster's/Inter/2nd and Funk and

Wagnalls' definitions are, more or less, similar to Oxford's. It is strongly assumed here that the words 'enunciate' in Oxford and 'pronounce' in Funk and Wagnalls are naturally more related to the production of the nomenemes in the sequence of a given word than to the pronunciation of the phonemes involved in those words.

It is only Webster's/Encyclo definition of spelling as "to name, write, print or signal the letters which make up a word or syllable....." that seems to be the most accurate and comprehensive definition of all those encountered in the published literature. 'To name' stands for the enunciation of the nomenemes, whereas 'to print' and 'to write' stand for the formation of the graphemes in a given sequence. It is very significant to notice the inclusion of the term 'to signal' first in the definition of Webster/New and Webster/Encyclo and later in Webster/Inter/3rd. This move is an attempt to account for spelling in Sign Language, which in turn indicates a broadening of the meaning of spelling to include exceptional communication.

DISCUSSION

That spelling in English is difficult has long been a fact that needs no further discussion; instead, the discussion and research should be concentrated on how to teach it systematically and successfully despite the difficulty. In fact, this has been the trend during the last three decades which produced extensive research to help shed light on the nature of spelling as a developmental process which requires the involvement of a wide

range of sensori-cognitive modalities severally or jointly. Studies by Templeton (1986, 1991-a, 1991-b), Tasaroff (1990) Wilde (1990), Sterling and Robson (1992), and Odisho (1994), among others, contain relevant bibliographies for any investigator intending to pursue the recent and current research in spelling.

With the above different identities of the alphabet and the different practices that go on under the rubric of spelling, it becomes remarkably clear that 'spelling' is more than what Hanna et al simply claim it to be - the process of encoding or rendering spoken words into written symbols. A careful consideration of the definitions and practices makes it incumbent upon the investigator to acknowledge the existence of different modes of spelling. A very detailed layout will yield the format displayed in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2

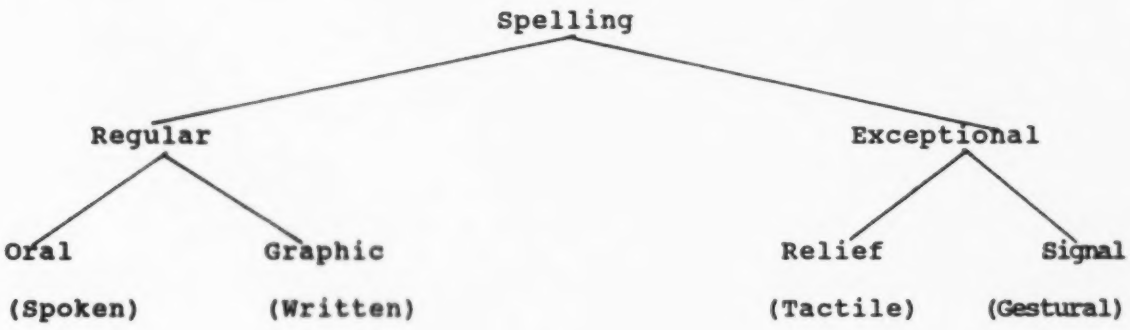

Fig. 2, a detailed layout of different modes of spelling

Based on the schematic representation in Figure 2, regular spelling includes the oral and the graphic modes. The oral mode stands for the voicing out of the nomenemes of a given word in their proper sequence and combination. It is primarily a vocal-auditory activity typified by what goes on during a spelling-bee competition. It is, therefore, easy to notice that this mode of spelling is not accounted for in Hanna's and Crystal's definitions. The graphic mode stands for the formation of the graphemes in a given word in their proper sequence and combination. It is this mode of spelling that Hanna's and Crystal's definitions exclusively represent. Thus, graphic spelling is primarily a haptic-visual activity. Haptic in the above context represents a combination of tactile and kinesthetic responses invoked in grapheme formation (Hanna et al, 1982). Additional modes of spelling other than the above-mentioned are treated here as exceptional. Under the exceptional, the relief/tactile stands for the system of lettering (letter formation) used by the blind in which each character is a combination of raised dots (relief) that are read by touch (The Random House College Dictionary, 1975). The signal/gestural stands for the system of hand configurations and motions used by the deaf (Fromkin and Rodman, 1993).

Obviously, the regular and the exceptional modes are not mutually exclusive. The blind, for instance, do practice regular oral spelling and the deaf can have easy access to graphic spelling. However, at this stage, the present study will be confined to regular spelling which in itself has enough important

aspects to be considered for a better understanding, learning and teaching of it.

It has already been indicated above that oral and graphic modes of spelling are essentially two different processes in nature that depend on different sensory and cognitive modalities and are expressed through different alphabet identities. In spite of those differences they may often be complementary in function. The oral speller does need to have a mental image (vision) of the targeted word in order to facilitate the conversion of its graphemes into their nomenemes. By the same token, the graphic speller does frequently need the nomenemes to remind him of the graphemes. Moreover, in both settings, spellers need to remind themselves of the phonemes and the overall pronunciation of the targeted words to reinforce the production of the nomenemes in oral spelling and the graphemes in graphic spelling.

INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE ALPHABET TRICHOTOMY AND SPELLING DICHOTOMY

All the above discussion of the alphabet trichotomy and spelling dichotomy will remain academic and theoretical without highlighting their instructional implications in both learning and teaching. The general pedagogical significance of such knowledge about the alphabet and spelling is that with better understanding of the relationship between the two there is greater opportunity for a better design of the instruction and its implementation. All in all, most of us as instructors do deal with the alphabet

trichotomy and the spelling dichotomy, but often unconsciously and/or unsystematically. Most children learn the alphabet through the memorization of its nomenemes or through the singing of its components in the form of clusters of nomenemes viz., ABCDEFG HIJKLMNOP QRS TUV WXY & Z now I know my ABCs.....With the help of both practices the child is learning the sequence of the alphabetic units (one aspect of the first identity of the alphabet) within the set. Simultaneously, the child is also learning the nomenemes (the second identity). The practices are also partially exposing the learner to the phonemes (the third identity) since the nomenemes may include a form of phonetic representation of the phoneme. The nomenemes 'kay,' 'el,' and 'em,' for instance, include the sounds [k], [l] and [m]. However, as pointed out earlier on, in English the grapheme and/or nomeneme correspondence with phonemes is often quite misleading due to inconsistency or the so-called lack-of-fit (Tompkins & Hoskisson, 1991:437). For instance, the nomenemes of 'c' and 'g' are 'cee' and 'jee,' but contextually (in pronunciation) the graphemes most frequently carry the phonetic value of [k] and [g], respectively. In fact, at times, the nomeneme may not include any phonetic indication of the grapheme viz., the nomeneme 'eitch' does not include and [h] sound. Finally, when children are shown the letter shapes and are asked to reproduce them, they are in reality familiarizing themselves with the form (another aspect of the first identity besides the sequence) and getting ready for graphic spelling and overall writing.

There are several major lessons to be learned from a better understanding of the alphabet trichotomy and spelling dichotomy. Firstly, we should not confuse one alphabet identity with the other. As teachers a great number of us still fail to clearly distinguish the three identities. This failure can be extremely confusing and counterproductive. Misconceptions such as the following are very common:

*That English has 26 sounds. In reality, English has more than 40 sounds/phonemes, but has only 26 graphemes/letters or 26 nomenemes/letter-names.

*That English has 5 or 6 vowels. In reality, English has more than 15 vowel phonemes, but has only 5 vowel graphemes or 5 nomenemes.

Scores of such misstatements and inaccuracies are still repeatedly encountered in print and in our classrooms. This is mainly attributed to teachers' lack of exposure to the insights and findings of modern linguistics concerning the manner in which the spoken and the written modes of language interface and are portrayed via the alphabet. Phonics, which is not a discipline of modern linguistics and is hardly ever encountered within its terminology, is typical in its confusion of the three identities of the alphabet. What worsens the situation further is that phonics dominates the language views of most of our teachers. It is very rare to see a teacher who would not say that English has five or six vowels. The mere mention of the existence of five vowels with long and short variants is linguistically untenable because it

implies a grapheme-based approach which does not work well for English whose five vowel graphemes are so variably and unpredictably used. What complicates the situation even further is the fact that phonics identifies the five long vowels on the basis of their letter-names/nomenemes (Leu and Kinzer, 1991:185), whereas the short ones are usually identified by their sounds.

Secondly, as teachers, we should stop dealing with spelling as a generic language skill. At least two modes of it - oral and graphic - should be recognized and taught systematically. Oral spelling, which is primarily a vocal-auditory activity, relies heavily on the auditory memory and the ability to recall the nomenemes in proper combinations and sequences, whereas graphic spelling is primarily a haptic-visual activity and relies heavily on the formation of the graphemes in proper combinations and sequences. Thus any attempt to redefine regular spelling in the light of the present discussion it should rather read as follows: the process of encoding spoken or written words in the appropriate sequences of nomenemes or graphemes

An important situation in which the above dichotomy should be maintained is that of the second language learning, especially when both languages - the native and the target - use the same alphabet such as in English and Spanish. A common observation in classes of limited English proficient Hispanics is the considerable difficulty the learners experience when asked to spell orally some of the simplest words in English or even their first names and surnames. The overall difficulty arises not because those learners are

unfamiliar with the graphemes, but because the learners are unfamiliar with the nomenemes in English. Hesitation, indecision and confusion are symptomatic in such bilingual spelling situations because the speller is undergoing a state of mental transformation of the nomenemes from the native language to the target one.

Thirdly, as an extension to oral-graphic dichotomy, it is imperative to point out that oral spelling by nature tends to be more cognitively demanding than graphic spelling since the speller has to execute the following steps:

a. Visualize the word as a whole,

b. Visualize the sequence of the graphemes within the word,

c. Sound out the nomenemes of the graphemes, and

d. Remember the point at which he/she is in the sequence of nomenemes i.e. remember what he/she has already letter-named and what awaits to be letter-named.

In graphic spelling, steps a and b are the same as in oral spelling, but step c is replaced with the writing of the graphemes an activity that in itself renders step d redundant because the speller can see the portion of the word that he/she has already written down. The absence of the last step alleviates the burden on the memory and makes graphic spelling cognitively less demanding. It is precisely because of this fact that many spellers who are confronted with oral spelling situations prefer to resort to graphic spelling to facilitate the process of symbol sequencing. This move to avoid oral spelling becomes more common in Bilingual and ESL classes especially when the learner has not yet developed

an automatic mastery of the letter-names. Otto (Personal Communication, 1992) made the observation that in some classrooms spelling tests are "corrected" in a whole class activity when the teacher orally "spells" the words. In her view, this is probably a very confusing task for Bilingual and LEP students. She, therefore, suggests that teachers use an overhead or chalkboard on which the target words are written as a supplement to oral spelling correction.

CONCLUSIONS

A more comprehensive and systematic understanding of the nature of the alphabet, its three identities as letters/graphemes, letter/nomenemes and sounds/phonemes and their specific functions in the teaching of various language skills and subskills should be an essential part of our language arts curriculum and instructional plan. Such understanding becomes even more imperative in situations involving language minority students whose presence in our regular classrooms is steadily increasing.

The curriculum and the instruction should clearly spell out the objectives and the teaching and learning strategies that are most appropriate for the recognition and implementation of the three identities and their functions within one language and across languages. With such an approach, one will not only secure a more realistic understanding of a major tool of language instruction, but may also minimize the misconceptions that many of our teachers and students are unduly exposed to during the process of language

teaching/learning.

The multidimensional alphabet-spelling connection should no longer be misconceived as a unidimensional one. The connection is both graphic and oral leading to the need for the recognition of an oral-graphic dichotomy in spelling. This dichotomy helps in highlighting a more intricate relationship between the alphabet as a tool and spelling as a process.

A major implication of such a trend is the need for the enhancement and updating of our language arts teacher training programs that will enable the teachers to acquire such knowledge and implement it in their classes.

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ABSTRACT

For a better understanding of spelling as a process and skill and the implementation of the knowledge acquired, this study recognizes an alphabet trichotomy and a spelling dichotomy and highlights the significance of the connection between the two for a more effective and efficient learning and teaching of spelling.